



Chapter 9

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: *conquering the scenic route*

A wolf in sheep's clothing

Someone who hides malicious intent under the guise of kindness.

Origin: Aesop's Fables. A wolf, disguised under the skin of sheep, inveigles his way into the fold, for the purpose of easy prey.

In certain cultures, taking the scenic route may be considered a form of politeness and respect, particularly in Asia. Western readers should not rush to judgement on this topic. Yet too often in our written communications we use the indirect path to meaning as a shield or security blanket. Bureaucrats and the legal profession have practised this art of obfuscation for generations. Perceptive writers have attempted to sound the alarm, among them Charles Dickens and Sir Ernest Gowers.

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1857)

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office.

Sir Ernest Gowers, *Plain Words* (1954)

Correctness is not enough. The words used may all be words approved by the dictionary and used in their right senses; the grammar may be faultless and the idiom above reproach. Yet what is written may still fail to convey a ready and precise meaning to the reader.

How right these men were, a century apart. If anything, our obscurantists have since refined the practice of circumlocution (also known as periphrasis), taking the scenic route to meaning and clarity as matter of habit. All too often these days we are likely to come across a passage like this:

BHP Billiton, world's largest mining company, 2009

Our strategy is to own long-life, low-cost, export-oriented, expandable assets. While we have dozens of future growth options that meet these characteristics, many of our existing assets can and are being expanded to ensure we can grow to meet increasing demand for our commodities. Our ability to undertake brownfield expansions of our existing assets allows us to spend investment dollars on assets we know well, environments we are familiar with and ore bodies we already understand. This strategy decreases the risks associated with developing a new project and increases the speed with which we can deliver more of our product to market.

With careful reading we can unravel the writer's intention but it's hard work. Some readers may give up in the attempt. What about the following effort from an otherwise highly articulate Queenslander? Talk about taking the scenic route to clarity.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, speech to Brookings Institution, April 2008

Therefore, there is, in my argument, on the face of it, a natural complementarity between these two philosophical approaches and a complementarity that could be developed further in the direction of some form of conceptual synthesis.

A real dog's breakfast, as was this arcane offering from a well-intentioned Kevin at the London 2008 Progressive Governance Summit:

There has to be a greater synergy between, let's call it our policy leadership in this, which has been focused so much, legitimately, on targets and global architecture, almost reverse-engineered back to the means by which you can quickly deliver outcomes, and on the demand side in our economy we're looking at potential advances in terms of 20 to 25% range if you do this across the board. It all takes cost, but let me tell you it's probably the quickest lever you can pull given the challenges we face.

On that occasion, jargon filled in until the boss got back: a pity, because the former PM's valuable cargo was lost in transit. Speaking of prime ministerial muck-ups, here's one from Bob Hawke quoted in Stephen Murray-Smith's *Right Words*.

The National Times, 22nd Nov 1985

And that tends to mean at times if you want to put it, there is no point in running away from it, it tends to mean at times that there's that there's a lack of specificity, or if you want to put it another way, there's a range of options which are put which are there to accommodate that indisputable fact about the social democratic parties such as ours.

Here's a former Alaskan governor and vice-presidential candidate.

Sarah Palin, reported in *The New York Times*, 14th November 2008

My concern has been the atrocities there in Darfur and the relevance to me with that issue as we spoke about Africa and some of the countries there that were kind of the people succumbing to the dictators and the corruption of some collapsed governments on the continent, the relevance was Alaska's investment in Darfur with some of our permanent fund dollars.

George Orwell quotes a prime example of circumlocutory writing in his entertaining essay 'Politics and the English Language.'

'Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.'

Consider this babble from the Department of Education, Science and Technology (2008). Does communication need to take such a long-cut?

A national quality framework will provide parents, communities and operators of early childhood education and care services with a nationally consistent, streamlined and integrated licensing and accreditation system which ensures quality standards are implemented and maintained across all services. The new quality system will be aspirational and it may take some time to implement the full suite of standards to the highest quality level.

Amid such a forest lurk worthy trees but finding them is not easy. How much clearer the prose could be with a little attention to presentation, such as SAI Global's summary of their quality management system:

The global recognition and acceptance of ISO 9001 reflects the proven, practical benefits it continues to generate for companies worldwide, such as:

- ✓ reduced costs and increased efficiency by better management of key processes
- ✓ increased customer satisfaction and retention
- ✓ improved employee motivation, awareness, and morale
- ✓ enhanced marketplace profile

This is hardly Wordsworth but it doesn't have to be. Plenty of managerial jargon remains in the preceding example but at least the reader has a chance at comprehension. Clarity does not need to mean kindergarten English but writers should develop a little empathy for the reader who isn't a topic expert.

Communication in print or on a Website will be at its most effective when it remains plain and simple.

Nevertheless, we should guard against false clarity in the guise of well-packaged sales pitches. As this passage from the Commonwealth Bank shows, a reader might be able to follow the text but it still amounts to mutton dressed as lamb.

Our brand promise, Determined to be different [sic], was launched on 26th January 2008 and encapsulates the determination we have to be a different bank, and to be different from all banks in Australia.

Determined to be different is underpinned by the new truths of banking, which are five key platforms for our differentiation:

- Determined to focus on service and on service and on service
- Determined to earn your business, not count on it
- Determined to place you at the centre of everything
- Determined to offer strength in uncertain times
- Determined to be better than we have ever been.

And yet the preceding statement from the Commonwealth Bank is a model of clarity compared to Macquarie Bank, which sets out a position plainly and simply, without ever committing the mistake of saying anything.

Macquarie Bank Limited has received final approval to restructure the Macquarie Group into a non-operating holding company (NOHC) structure containing separate banking and non-banking groups. The new NOHC, Macquarie Group Limited, will be listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. See the Explanatory Memorandum for further information, in particular the following sections:

'At a Glance', Section 1 and Section 3.

The Restructure is intended to address two key objectives simultaneously:

1. Position the Macquarie Group to continue to pursue the strategies that have been responsible for its strong growth, and
2. Assist the Macquarie Group in meeting its obligations to the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA).

The MBL Board considers the Restructure to be the most appropriate solution of the alternatives available. The restructured Macquarie Group will have a structure similar to that used by a significant number of major financial institutions globally.

This gobbledegook might keep a few shareholders mollified but is anyone the wiser for it? Aren't there four or five simpler ways of telling us what it may mean?